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2000

Review of: Aristophanes' Clouds (with an introduction by Ian C. Storey)

Max Nelson
University of Windsor

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Recommended Citation

Nelson, Max. (2000). Review of: Aristophanes' Clouds (with an introduction by Ian C. Storey). *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*.

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Peter Meineck (trans.), *Aristophanes' Clouds (with an introduction by Ian C. Storey)*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000. Pp. 125. ISBN 0-87220-516-9 (pb). \$5.95.

Reviewed by Max Nelson, University of British Columbia (maxg@interchange.ubc.ca)

Word count: 1282 words

Since the appearance of A.H. Sommerstein's very successful literal translation of Aristophanes's *Clouds* in the Aris & Phillips series less than twenty years ago, there have been at least five further new published attempts at rendering the play into English.¹ It is certainly a bold enterprise to introduce yet one more translation onto the scene, but Peter Meineck has risen well to the challenge.²

Meineck's main purpose, as Producing Artistic Director of the Aquila Theatre Company (among other positions), has been to provide a translation which is "understandable, performable, accessible, and entertaining" (xlv), with emphasis on performability (see xliii-xliv). In these objectives he has certainly succeeded, though it is another question whether he has provided the best school text (as can be seen, he considers accuracy to be secondary). However, even as a text for performance, certain major elements are still neglected. For one, almost nothing is said of costuming (see the endnote on ll. 539-540), and, more importantly, there is no complete introductory discussion of the appearance of the set. Ian Storey notes in the introduction that two doors are needed in the *Clouds* (xxii; one could add to his examples the fact that two, or possibly three doors, were also used in the *Peace*), and Meineck also speaks of two doors (11), but the computer rendering of the stage at xlii shows only one. Further, mention at the outset should be made of the basin and herm on stage (ll. 1473 and 1478), the "door hatch" and windows of the school (99), etc.

Meineck reveals throughout his indebtedness to Sommerstein, though he occasionally departs from his text (see, for example, l. 880) and his interpretations (he detects sexual innuendo, perhaps rightly, at ll. 53-55 and 196-197). His footnotes and endnotes (both are included) are usually appropriate and helpful, though some important explanations are missing. It is striking, for instance, that Meineck's "Pondertorium" is never explained (neither in the introduction at xxii, xxiii, and xxvi [where it is simply equated with the undefined phrontisterion], or when the word first appears in the play at l. 94).

The translation itself is straightforward and idiomatic, as well as well-paced and funny, with choral sections adapted into entertaining rhyming couplets. For the sake of comedy, Meineck makes various types of changes to the original. For one, he adds many clever punning phrases throughout the play, such as numerous ones on horses: "taken for a ride" (l. 24), "saddled with lawsuits" (l. 34), "like flogging a dead horse" (l. 73), "Wild horses wouldn't drag me in there!" (l. 120), "I've had enough of your horsing around" (l. 123), "without horse and home" (l. 125),³ "on

a tight rein" (l. 243), and "round the bend" (l. 1273). Similarly, he includes the scatological puns "gutsy stuff" (l. 166) and "a deep understanding" (l. 168), and he ingeniously mentions "water on the brain" and "brainwashing" at ll. 234-236.

Other sorts of changes are made to improve the humor potential of the original (the bed can walk on its own because it is flea-infested, rather than the bugs preventing him from taking the bed at l. 634) or additions are made to provoke an extra laugh (for instance, "stick them where the sun don't shine" at l. 1302). Often other words or lines are subtly changed or added to make the dialogue flow more naturally, though at times superfluously (see, for example, the addition of "You hear that!" at l. 26, "What was that?" at l. 157, "Who'd have thought it?" at l. 165, "It's a disgraceful way to treat your dear old dad" at l. 1390).

Explanatory lines are also usefully added (for example, "in case they sneak off and hide out in enemy territory" l. 7, "a good old-fashioned thrifty name" l. 65, "to make a lovely wineskin" l. 1237), though the fact that he is departing from the actual text is unfortunately not noted in any of these instances. Obscure and topical references are often omitted (ll. 23, 186, 257, 332, 438, 864, 922-924, 984, 1261, 1266) or simplified (ll. 52, 989, 998), usually with an accompanying note, though again not invariably (as promised at xliv). Students can surely benefit from learning about, for example, the practice of throwing an apple at a beloved (ll. 996-997, "love token"), the game of cottabus (l. 1073, "drinking games"), the function of the barathron (l. 1449, "abyss"), etc. The reference to the Clouds having noses (l. 344), commented upon by neither Sommerstein nor Meineck, is explained by Henderson (*The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991 (second edition). 243 and 247). References to obols, drachmas, and talents are retained by Meineck, but staters are put out of circulation (l. 1041) and minas are converted into drachmas (ll. 21-22, 30, 1256).

Meineck has wisely decided not to update contemporary references (xliv),⁴ though he sometimes slips in certain unfortunate anachronisms, like the expression "devil-may-care" (l. 445), the use of soap (l. 836; the first possible reference to which is in Theocr., *Id.* 15.30), and the wearing of pants (l. 1387); see also "playing second fiddle" at xiii (translating *Wasps* 1018).

A great asset to this slim volume is Storey's long and very useful introduction, his appendix on the first version of *Clouds*, and his suggestions for further reading. The introduction is perfect for undergraduates (he targets students specifically [xxxiii and xxxvii, n. 49]), though he sometimes uses terms like *ad loc* and *eisangelia* (xiv) and speaks somewhat obscurely of meters (xxviii). He provides a number of good modern parallels (vii, xxi, xxv, xxxi, xxxvii, n. 48, xxxviii) to help students get a feel for Old Comedy, and one could perhaps add to his examples the similar satirical characterizations of Saturday Night Live and also the fact that Aristophanes' insistence on pigeonholing people and repeating over and over again the same old jokes about them (such as the familiar one of the cowardly Cleonymus at *Clouds* 353, to be repeated in *Wasps*, *Peace*, and *Birds*) is similar to the practice of Jay Leno (are President Clinton's sexual indiscretions still funny?). Meineck also no doubt expects his audience to recognize an allusion to Seinfeld when he speaks of "double-dipping" at ll. 1198-1200. Storey's very good bibliography (120-125) could have included some other important works.⁵

Few would deny the veracity of Plato's claim (esp. *Apol.* 18a-19d) that *Clouds* had a negative effect on views of Socrates. The real question of interest to students is whether Aristophanes, in creating his unique and influential contemporary portrait of Socrates, was malicious or whether a seemingly innocuous joke got out of hand. Storey includes some good remarks on this issue (xxxvii-xl), tending to favor the latter possibility, but the bibliography he provides is not much help for such Socratic inquiries.⁶

Finally, a few minor errors should be pointed out. Storey speaks of Strepsiades as "Twister" (xxxvi) even though the endnote at 101 has the more correct "son of Twister". One finds "an religious idol" for "a religious idol" (107) and "festivals of the Athenian" for "festivals of the Athenians" (123). The quotation mark should be placed in front of "Three hundred drachmas" (l. 31) not "What terrible debt" (l. 30). The "wolf" is omitted from the catalogue at l. 347 (though it appears at l. 352). It should be "six" jugs not "four" at l. 1238.

In conclusion, Meineck has crafted an excellent version for the stage, and has by and large sagaciously decided what to add to and what to omit from the original for his modern theatrical audience. However, a more literal translation, with fewer liberties taken, and a more authentic tone, is perhaps better suited to the classroom.

Notes:

1. A.H. Sommerstein (edited with translation and notes), *The Comedies of Aristophanes*, vol. 3: *Clouds*. Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1982 (third corrected impression 1991) (literal British prose); T.G. West and G.S. West (translation with notes), *Plato and Aristophanes: Four Texts on Socrates*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984 (revised edition 1998). Pp. 115-176 (accurate American prose); J. Henderson (transl.), *Aristophanes' The Clouds*. Newburyport, Mass.: Focus Publishing, 1992 (reprinted 1997) (well-crafted American verse); M.C. Marianetti (annotated translation), *Aristophanes: The Clouds*. Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1997 (straightforward American prose); J. Henderson (edited and translated), *Aristophanes Clouds, Wasps, Peace*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1998. Pp. 1-211 (faithful American prose); C. Poster (transl.) in D.R. Slavitt and P. Bovie, eds., *Aristophanes, 3: The Suits, Clouds, Birds*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. Pp. 85-192 (highly actable American verse).
2. Originally published in *Aristophanes 1: Clouds, Wasps, Birds*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999. Pp. 8-122. Only the cross-references to the other two plays have been omitted in this reprint.
3. This last translation was first proposed by A.H. Sommerstein in "On Translating Aristophanes: Ends and Means," *G & R* 20 (1973) 140-154, at 144-145. This is an important article in which he defends his Penguin translation (*The Acharnians, The Clouds, Lysistrata*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973), which is very different from his later literal translation of 1982.
4. G. Chapman, "Aristophanes for All?" *Acta Classica* 26 (1983) 41-51, proposes the radical solution that every single reference should be somehow updated in a good translation of Aristophanes (see his translation of *Clouds* 206-216 at 45, with its mentions of Normandy,

Eisenhower, and Russia). Thankfully, most translators follow the more moderate view that the language has to be modernized, but not (at least usually) the content.

5. For instance, L.M. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Poetry*. New York: 1981 (reprinted Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company, 1984); C.F. Russo, *Aristophanes: An Author for the Stage*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994; S. Colvin, *Dialect in Aristophanes and the Politics of Language in Ancient Greek Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

6. A good introductory article for students is R.K. Fisher, "The Relevance of Aristophanes: A New Look at Clouds," *G & R* 35 (1988) 23-28, who argues that Aristophanes's main purpose was to make his audience laugh. See also the bibliography in West and West (note 1 above), 183-184, as well as P.A. Vander Waerdt, "Socrates in the Clouds." in *idem*, ed., *The Socratic Movement*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994, 48-86. Interestingly, Athenaeus (5.219a-b) points out that Plato provides some material portraying Socrates in a poor light (that, for instance, his mother was a midwife and that he slept under the same blanket as Alcibiades) which is not mentioned by the comic poets.